

Simonides and Greek tragedy

Simonides' closeness to Greek tragedy has been noted before. In his discussion of Simonides' fragment spoken by Danae, fr. 16 (PMG 543), Hutchinson sees a parallel with Sophocles' *Ajax*, and he sees "seeds of Euripidean monologue, monody, and pathos." (Hutchinson, 308). In this paper, I would like to look at this fragment in light of tragedy, and I would suggest that the poem about human excellence contains tragic parallels.

In the so-called Danae fragment, Danae says to her sleeping child:

οὐ δ' ἄωτεις, γαλαθηνῶι δ' ἦτορι
κνώσσεις. . .

(9-10)

The infant Perseus sleeps because his heart has been fed with milk. The adjective is commonly used to describe the young of animals and infants, but there is no record of it being used with "heart" (Bethe's conjecture) or any other word for the abstract person in LSJ.

Not only is he asleep, he has no awareness (οὐκ ἀλέγεις) of the waves that are passing above their heads as they float in the chest. In a similar way, Ajax becomes aware that his infant son is not aware of his troubles (οὐδὲν τῶνδ' ἐπαισθάνηι κακῶν, 553). When he grows up, he will have to show what kind of man he is, but for now, Ajax describes his innocent nature thus: "feed on light breezes, rejoicing in your young *psyche*, a delight to your mother." The description of innocence, κούφοις πνεύμασιν βόσκου, / νέαν ψύχην ἀτάλλων (*Ajax*, 558-9), has some interesting parallels with the Simonides passage, perhaps most notably that the "self" is the way it is because of what it feeds on.

This observation of the innocence of the state of sleep is found in another passage in *Ajax*. When Tecmessa comes on stage in the *Ajax*, Ajax is still sleeping after his attack of insanity. She argues that Ajax is better off while he is under the influence of the *nosos*: "That man, while he was in the sickness/ was himself pleased at the evils by which he was possessed,/ but he grieved his sane companions./ But now, when he has recovered from the disease,/ he is driven by total pain,/ and we still grieve no less than before." (271-276) Like Perseus, Ajax is oblivious, yet the woman beside him is pained. Despite the differences in detail between the two scenes, there is a single line by Tecmessa which could well have been spoken by Danae: "While being with us, he pains us, the ones who have our wits about us." (273)

Although the passages are more abstract, there is a parallelism of thought between Simonides' comments about virtue, Hutchinson 15 (PMG 542) and the second stasimon of Sophocles' *Antigone*. In this choral passage, the two sisters have been sent inside, and the house of Oedipus is facing extinction. The chorus comment on these affairs by considering that "delusion" is common to all humans. "The morality and theology of the Song are deeply traditional, with echoes from Hesiod, Solon, Hdt., and esp. A. *Th.* 720-91. . ." (Griffith, p. 218-9) Although this is true, it seems that certain passages in this chorus seem to be elucidated somewhat when compared with Simonides 15. A man can be good only when fortune allows him; when "irresistible fortune seizes him" he must be bad. (Sim. 15-16) In Sophocles, "The bad seems good, when the god leads his wits towards disaster." (*Ant.* 623-4)

Griffith (p. 229) says these lines of the *Antigone* will appear to be profound to some and platitudinous to others. He does not mention that some will find it both. Like the more famous first stasimon, the second stasimon comments on the scene that has just passed. The second stasimon is focused on the power of the gods to cause ruin, but the

choral statements in a tragedy must be taken in the context of the whole play. The generalities of both Simonides and Sophocles apply to part of what has occurred but not to all. Simonides like Sophocles seems deliberately to echo the traditional language, but his conclusion is not traditional, that he will praise a man who willingly does nothing shameful:

πάντας δ' ἐπαίνημι καὶ φιλέω,
ἐκὼν ὅστις ἔρδηι
μηδὲν αἰσχρόν. (28-30)

This language recalls a famous line from Aeschylus. Explaining why he rebelled against Zeus, Prometheus exclaims: “willingly, willingly I erred” (ἐκὼν ἐκὼν ἤμαρτον. *Pro.* 266).

Simonides' remarks seem to be part of the discussion that will eventually make it into Aristotle's *Poetics*, esp. chapter 13. There Aristotle says that it is “polluted” if a “good” (ἐπιείκης) man's fortune changes from good to bad. Simonides is saying here that the “man who is totally praiseworthy” does not exist. In the *Antigone's* second stasimon, every man is subject to failure (ἄτη).

These passages presuppose a definition of *hamartia* much like that of Nussbaum, who observes that the errors in actual surviving tragedies involve “both blameworthy and non-blameworthy missings-of-the-mark. . .In short, the notion of *hamartia* takes in a variety of important goings-wrong that do not result from settled badness; and thus it is a concept well fitted to discourse about the gap between being good and living well.” (*Fragility of Goodness*, 383).

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